



John Balcomb, President / Executive Director DBS Tampa Bay, Inc.

[Community Health](#)

- [Health Care](#)

Depression Bipolar Support Tampa Bay helps people know they aren't alone

When Dr. Robert Morris first discovered Depression Bipolar Support Tampa Bay years ago, he was struggling with his mental health. He had tried to manage his depression and found himself lost, exhausted and terrified of heading toward another downward spiral.

Having never attended a support group before, he was anxious about what to expect, but as soon as he walked in, he felt empathy and acceptance from the group. Today, Morris sits on the board of directors at DBS Tampa Bay. This nonprofit organization offers support, education and resources for individuals diagnosed with major depressive disorder, bipolar disorder and other affective (mood) disorders. The organization also extends care to family members and friends seeking understanding and support from those they know on that journey.

“The warmth I felt from that first group enabled me to open up, speak about what was going on, and cry in front of a group of total strangers I had just met,” he shared. “The group welcomed me with open arms, and for the first time in years, I did not feel so alone.”

DBS Tampa Bay was founded in 1985 and has since become the top host of free, in-person mental health group support meetings in the Tampa Bay region. Eight weekly support groups are located in various locations in three counties. Since the resumption of in-person meetings after the pandemic, the organization has served over 8,300 people annually.

In addition to peer support groups, the organization offers a free educational lecture and workshop series with mental health professionals, experts, and authors in psychiatry and neuroscience. DBS Tampa Bay also features the Elene Laurie Aiken Memorial Library, which contains the largest collection of self-help books on the West Coast of Florida. The library is also free to support group attendees.

Further, the organization has been closely involved with the University of South Florida’s School of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neuroscience, hosting a weekly support group there for more than 35 years.

All-volunteer team in Tampa Bay

John Balcomb, president and executive director at DBS Tampa Bay and a volunteer with the organization for the last 21 years, said the organization is 100% volunteer run and has no paid employees.

“My background as a national sales manager for a manufacturing company and then owning a chain of retail stores gave me organizational skills that I could use running the nonprofit,” he said. “It was very rewarding to see individuals come to us in a shutdown or broken condition and witness them improve ... to where they had recovered their self-confidence and were able to be themselves again, functioning normally and returning to work.”

DBS Tampa Bay receives funding through donations made at weekly support groups, educational events held throughout the year and benevolent donations set up through its website. He said that health care providers and other benefactors have also received larger donations.

Throughout its operations, DBS Tampa Bay has also been privileged to partner with local “211” agencies that cover the five counties of the Tampa Bay region. It has been listed as a resource with the Crisis Center of Tampa Bay Inc. 211, Tampa Bay Cares 211 and United Way 211 of Manatee and Sarasota.

Balcomb said the organization’s work is helping create a stronger and more vibrant workforce in Tampa Bay and beyond.

“Diagnosed individuals will be able to return to work sooner and be part of the workforce, compared to someone who doesn’t receive positive reinforcement to remain dedicated to a treatment plan,” he said. “I am excited for the future, as these past 40 years have created a solid foundation in the Tampa Bay community for our organization to continue helping dispel the stigma of mental illness that prevents many individuals from seeking help to begin with, as well as helping reduce the numbers of suicide and suicide attempts.”

Dr. Michael Sheehan is a board-certified psychiatrist, former vice president at DBS Tampa Bay and worked as a scientific advisor to the Depressive and Bipolar Support Alliance in Tampa for 30 years.

“I’ve witnessed firsthand how this supportive group bridges the gap between professional mental healthcare workers and those with lived experience, providing essential aid to individuals with depressive disorders and their families,” he said.

For Morris and many others, the work that DBS Tampa Bay is doing is life-changing.

“My time at DBS Tampa Bay has meant more to me than I could ever adequately express,” Morris said. “I am a better man today in all aspects of my life.”